

Statement by Hon. Christopher H. Smith

The Subcommittee will come to order, and good morning to everyone.

Today's hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations will study the terrible situation facing millions of children across the world who are forced to live on the streets, and what the U.S. and other countries are doing, can do, or should do, to address the problem. The hearing will focus particular attention the situation in Brazil, the Philippines and Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Street children are, tragically, found in almost every country in the world. They are part of a vast population of children worldwide who live in abject poverty and are particularly vulnerable to abuse. They are murdered by vigilantes, who are in many cases policeman charged with enforcing the law and protecting human life. Instead, police and other vigilantes violate the law in the worst way imaginable, out of a perverted impulse to eliminate petty crime. Street children are used by criminal gangs and then often disposed of when they have outlived their usefulness. They are trafficked and exploited, sexually and for forced labor. Many end up as child soldiers. Many others are incarcerated in adult prisons, where they are victimized even further.

Worldwide street children number in the many millions, but no one really knows how many there are. An estimate reportedly made by the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the 1990s of 100 million street children worldwide is often cited, but the true number is unknown. It could be far worse now. Civil wars and the HIV/AIDS epidemic continually swell the numbers of street children, particularly in Africa. In the past the typical street children were boys 10-14 years old. Now the age ranges are drifting downward, and more and more girls are being found on the streets. Female street children face particular problems. They are more likely to be domestically and sexually abused, and they are more likely to become prostitutes increasing their health risks including that of HIV/AIDS.

Unlike many of the pressing human rights problems we confront, the problem of street children is rarely the result of the intentional malevolence of dictators or tyrannical regimes, although this does occur. Rather, some of the very worst situations exist in democratic nations, which are close friends. Like the worldwide plague of trafficking in women, men and children, the problems of street children have reached epidemic proportions because good people will not confront this evil or do enough to deal with it.

Faced with so many other intractable problems of poverty, unemployment and weak or nonexistent institutions of civil society, many struggling countries and their citizens throw up their hands in despair and try to pay little attention to the plight of street children. In the meantime, not only are the lives of their most precious resource, their children, being destroyed, their futures as prosperous and democratic rule of law societies are also put in jeopardy. No nation can afford to allow its police to become murderers, or its children to become outlaws, and hope to become or remain a stable, prosperous, democratic society. Ultimately, this is a security issue for all.

Many street children are orphans, or abandoned, or come from desperately poor families. Some are estranged from their families. Many, perhaps the large majority, do not attend school regularly. In order to survive on the streets, they must beg, steal or find some other means of earning money by scavenging, or other menial work helping street traders, shining shoes, washing car windshields. Many are lured by false promises of security and financial gain by older individuals into illicit prostitution, dangerous forced labor, or drug trafficking and violent crime.

What can we do?

The first rule must be to do no harm. Police and public authorities must be trained to deal with children on the street and to protect them, and those who mistreat or murder them must be punished. Experience has shown that if governments make it clear that crimes by policemen will be punished, the incidence of those crimes radically diminishes. Ending impunity is therefore a fundamental prerequisite for all other progress, and the U.S. government and International Organizations must never neglect to press this issue. We shall hear today how the State Department monitors the plight of Street Children, and what it is doing to convince our partners to stop crimes against street children.

The next task must be to ameliorate the situation of the children who find themselves on the streets. Society, through governmental and private institutions, must strive to meet the current needs of these children, so they can receive educations and live productive, useful and happy lives. Local governments often have limited programs and resources to address the special needs of street children. Developed democracies can assist, certainly with direct material assistance, but perhaps most of all through institution building. USAID and our NGO communities will discuss what they are doing and what more can be done.

Our administration witnesses today will be Mr. David Denehy, Director of Strategic Planning and External Affairs, for the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, which has for many years kept the attention of the world focused on the human rights violations against street children; and Mr. Lloyd Feinberg, Manager of the Displaced Children and Orphans Fund of the U.S. Agency for International Development, which works directly with foreign governments and NGO's to save street children.

On our second panel will be the distinguished Lord David Alton, of the House of Lords of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, who has heroically defended the fundamental human rights of all without exception for many years: the unborn, the elderly, the sick, the handicapped, children, prisoners, and people of faith everywhere.

Our third panel will include Father Shay Cullen, Founder of the PREDA (PRAY-duh) Foundation in the Philippines; Ms. Teresa Santos (tay-RAY-sah SAN-toos), Network Coordinator for Rede Viva-RJ (RAY-jay VEE-vah-Rio de Janeiro), Brazil; AND Mr. Andy Sexton, International Coordinator, Children at Risk, OASIS International.